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Free CHIP Information Sold for \$14.95

DPHHS Advises Against Paying for Free Insurance Information

HELENA - Employees in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) have learned of a marketing effort to sell CHIP applications and information for \$14.95 when the information is free at many Montana locations.

"People do not need to pay for this information," according to Mary Noel, who oversees CHIP for the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. "In fact, the information received for the \$14.95 is the same information we have available on our web site."

At least two Montana newspapers have printed paid advertisements touting "No Cost Insurance For Children" under the name Children's Health Coverage Advisers, which lists a Great Falls mailing address.

The advertisement also lists a toll-free telephone number. A CHIP employee who called the number was directed to send \$14.95 to the address listed in the advertisement in order to receive information. The message indicates that refunds will be given if children are found not to be eligible.

Seven days later, the CHIP worker received a letter from Children's Health Coverage Advisers with an application apparently downloaded from the CHIP web site (www.chip.state.mt.us).

In a letter to the Montana Consumer Protection Office - which is investigating the matter according to staff Attorney Cort Jensen - Noel wrote, "I am particularly dismayed" that someone may be "taking advantage of low-income families who are already financially stressed."

In addition to being available via the Internet, the free CHIP information is also accessible from the state CHIP office in Helena by calling toll-free 1-877-543-7669. Forms are also available at offices of public assistance in each Montana county, at many county public health departments, and at community health clinics and physician offices throughout the state.

Noel has also notified the office of Insurance Commissioner John Morrison about the advertisements.

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